

EU-China Security Relations

by John Quigley

Speaking at the European Institute for Asian Studies on 28th April, Mr Frank Umbach, Resident Fellow with the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) said that EU-China relations were at a cross-roads. The relationship, as seen by some key EU Member States, is still focussed on economic and trade ties and lacks sufficient expertise, on the EU side, on hard security issues for China and for Asia in general. Both the EU Council and the European Commission need to develop a more coherent China policy including one which fits into a transAtlantic framework.

Europe's relationship with China, which developed out of economic and trade links, has increasingly taken on a political hue and this has consequences in a strategic sense. By developing a Security Strategy and the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the EU is indicating where it sees itself in a global security framework. The coming EU enlargement may lead to a more fractured EU policy towards China, with some Member States content to overlook the security and strategic issues that have become integral to the relationship. Thus, the Franco-German initiative to lift the arms embargo could have important consequences for stability in the Taiwan strait.

In its paper on China-EU relations, Beijing declared that her interests rest in a multi-polar world, not dominated by the United States. Yet, this policy contains some contradictions. China favours a stronger EU but one that is not necessarily involved in conflict resolution affecting security issues in Asia. China demanded that the EU not support Taiwan's request for arms sales or membership of international organisations. As part of China's request for closer military to military contacts, China has demanded that the arms embargo, imposed since 1989, should be lifted. This is due in part to a cooling of relations between Russia and China, where President Putin has become concerned about the strategic balance in the Pacific Ocean. The growth of China's military budget goes unremarked, in contrast to the focus on Beijing's political and economic reforms. It is growing faster than inflation and, according to official figures, could be US\$50bn by 2005. The real budget, Mr Umbach said, could by order of magnitude be 3-5 times larger.

In the EU, France and Germany have called for the lifting of the 1989 arms embargo, imposed after the Tiananmen Square deaths. Both countries insist that arms sales could be governed by the EU's Code on Conduct on Arms Exports, although this is not legally binding and, Mr Umbach said, its restraints on trade are insufficient. President Chirac had said that China made enough progress in political and human rights reforms for the embargo to be lifted. This unilateral initiative, by two Member States, does not have full EU support. It would also place the United States in a very difficult position vis-à-vis its own embargo. Discussions between the US and the EU have come very late in the day.

For its part, China is particularly interested in dual-use technology and has been very keen to participate in Galileo, an EU satellite navigation system. Partly, this is to reduce dependence on the USA for GPS but also because Galileo has both civilian and military implications. However, the EU must consider the proliferation risks

associated with selling dual-use technology to China, due to Beijing's weak controls and the nature of the relationship between the military and political leadership.

Mr Umbach said that the EU Member States national decision making process demonstrated a sense of unilateralism that undermined the objectives of the EU's CFSP. In Germany, the Chancellor's office seems to be taking the decisions when the issue really belongs to the Foreign Office, where they would have the experience necessary to deal with the issue. At EU level, the questions concerning the effectiveness of the Code of Conduct are not being addressed. If the EU wishes to be taken seriously as a global player, then it must begin to address the strategic consequences of its decisions. A balanced policy towards China must address the hard security concerns including the long-term implications.

Acting as Discussant, Dr Axel Berkofsky, EIAS, noted that the EU was beginning to address concerns associated with the Code of Conduct both internally and from the United States. He wondered what could be done to make the provisions of the Code stronger to prevent proliferation. In December 2003, the EU declared China a strategic partner. Now China is demanding the lifting of the embargo as an essential element to the partnership, what should the EU's position be? In support of lifting the embargo, China argues that the United States already exports weapons to Taiwan, thus the cross-strait balance would not be affected.

In the question and answer session that followed, Mr Umbach said that China had both civilian and military interests in participating in the Galileo programme, not least to end US dominance of the Global Positioning Satellite system. Primarily, China was interested in participating to acquire dual-use technology for military means. The EU's Code of Conduct was ineffective on this type of technology. The EU can no longer afford to base its relationship with China around progress on human rights matters. Europe must develop a position on the security and strategic aspects to the relationship. In turn, China should address regional and world-wide uncertainty over the potential threat Beijing poses. Another of China's concerns is security of energy supply. China's dependence on the Middle East could be catastrophic for the economy if, for example, Saudi Arabia problems with Islamic terrorists became serious enough to disrupt oil production. ■

See also:

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